DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 440 CS 209 628

AUTHOR Danish, Barbara
TITLE Assumptions and Belief Systems That Underlie a Teacher's Use of Writing.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (36th, Minneapolis, MN, March 21-23, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beliefs; *Classroom Observation Techniques; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Teacher Education; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Behavior; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Surveys of teachers' use of writing in the classroom indicate that many teachers continue to use writing in a limited capacity, primarily for drill, notetaking, and evaluation. However, while these studies suggest attitudes teachers might hold, they say little about the beliefs that might underlie those attitudes. For example, the observation of one fourth grade teacher for one year revealed that appearance was of paramount importance to her; consequently, surface error became the most important part of a text to her. The teacher was not interested in generating or encountering problems that forced her to rethink her ideas or develop new solutions. She also felt the need to be the ultimate authority in the classroom and to have the children serve as a ready audience for her feelings. This need to express her feelings relates to writing in opposing ways. On the one hand, teachers believe that people need to express their feelings, while on the other hand, their desire to be the ultimate authority suppresses the children's desire for free expression. Such attitudes are not conducive to the concept of writing as a process and should be of concern to teacher educators. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED267440

Assumptions and Belief Systems That Underlie A Teacher's Use of Writing

Barbara Danish
New York University

We understand from researchers such as Janet Emig, Ann Berthoff, Nancy Martin and James Britton that writing is a language process that can have special value in education.

For one thing, writers must stimulate themselves, sustain their own thought, and work out ideas independently since there is no other person to help keep the talk going. Second, since there is no shared meaning with a fellow speaker or gesture or tone to help interpret what is being said, greater explicitness is required of the writer. Because there is a text which both teacher and student can examine and reflect on such explicitness and understanding can develop over time.

So writing is very rich as a mode of learning, and yet surveys of teachers' use of writing in the classroom indicate that many teachers continue to use it in a limited capacity, primarily for drill, notetaking and evaluation. Why would this be so? This must be a question that concerns those of us who are teacher educators.

Studies of teachers' uses of and attitudes towards writing by Britton, Applebee, Barnes, Gere and others both infer and point explicitly to attitudes about language and learning that suggest that these teachers are primarily transmission oriented, viewing learning as the transfer of information from the teacher to the student with writing as a way to help students

CS 209 628

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Barbara Danish

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

memorize that material and then be evaluated on their success. However while these studies suggest attitudes teachers might hold, they tell us little about the beliefs that might underlie those attitudes. What do I mean by this?

Say that we are working with teachers who believe that the instruction of Standard English is of primary importance in the instruction of written composition. How do we help them see the futility of grammar instruction outside the context of a text? Do we suggest relevant reading? But what if this attitude reflects a belief in the importance of appearance? Will reading research help change or make the teacher aware of that belief? Or what if it reflects a commitment to the way a teacher was taught? To understand a teacher's attitudes is important, but it is not yet guidance enough for how we can better conduct teacher education in writing. We must try to understand to the best of our knowledge:

What are the factors that relate to how teachers use and support writing in the classroom? What is writing for that silent majority who seems to be wedded to a minimal idea of writing, and why do they choose to use it as they do?

The research I have been engaged in for the past ten months and with which I will continue until the end of the school year, is an attempt to respond to both of these questions. In this ethnographic study, I have been interviewing and observing three teachers in an urban elementary school. Two of the three teachers use writing in their classrooms primarily for drill and evaluation. The third teacher uses writing more extensively. Despite

this difference, what I am finding is this:

That underlying our use of writing in the classroom is a complex world view that extends beyond language and learning issues. To change our use of writing in the classroom means, necessarily, that we must change ourselves.

If this is true, then teacher educators of teachers at any level may face a more difficult task than we ever imagined in not only encouraging teachers to try a different approach to writing, but in getting them even to hear and understand it.

Today I wish to illustrate my assertion by portraying one of the participants in the study who uses writing in limited ways. She is Lois, a fourth grade teacher, caucasian, a teacher of 14 years in this school of primarily Hispanic, but also oriental, caucasian and black children.

I will present three themes that comprise a part of Lois's world view and try to show their possible relationship to how Lois uses and supports writing in her classroom and, therefore, the changes in herself that might be involved if she were to change her use of writing.

The first theme is this: For Lois appearance is paramount. She is proud of her class because, she says, they make a good impression. She said of her class writing pen pal letters last year: "I had them write them over and correct them and said, We want to make it nice, we want to make a nice impression." It really interested me when she said that she had told her aunt about participating in this study. Her aunt said, "I hope you're making a good impression!" Perhaps when we work with teachers

we are actually working with the whole family.

This issue of appearance clearly relates to the way writing works in Lois's classroom, for appearance, surface error, is the most importance aspect of a text to Lois. "I care about the construction of sentences, grammatical aspects of writing. I can't like a piece of writing that's all wrong in English. I can't get excited about it."

Because she feels obliged to correct the surface error of all written work except their journals (though even there she sometimes corrects) and because of the time this takes, and the discouragement she feels in seeing the errors, she says she has her children write few pieces over a paragraph in length. This year they have written two book reports, a friendly letter, and two pieces of creative writing.

And yet other beliefs conflict with this one. For example, she says she values creative writing and believes she ought to do more of it.

And she has had her own difficulties with surface error. "In college," she told me, "if you had three minimum essential errors you failed the whole paper. Isn't that crazy? So here I was, this good writer, and I'd always gotten good English marks and comments- Oh Lois, that's a very nice report, that's a very nice research paper, always very sure of myself when it came to writing. I get back a paper and see F. I said Ma, they're crazy here- not to count what I'm saying but only to count...and after that I got a little insecure, and I think that stayed with me for a long time ...I didn't do well there."

So despite her belief that she should do more creative writing, and despite her own bad experience with surface error and her statement that content is more important than surface error, and despite her ability to suggest alternatives to correcting all errors on all papers, she is committed to the priority of appearance. In March as in September she reiterates, "See what I don't like Barbara, and I'll tell you the truth, is the final editing. it takes too much time, and it's constantly doing it. It's hard work that writing....You asked why I didn't like the district writing program...it didn't help because I wanted it to be revolutionary. Then it would be the key and all of a sudden the kids would be writing compositions I wouldn't have to correct."

Why is this belief of Lois's not conducive to the concept of writing I have outlined? Because there is no way for students to create a finished text and at the same time write their fragmented knowledge as they come to an understanding of a subject. If we want to use this special feature of writing, we have to be willing to look at a mirror of an often confused and developing thought process. However, that would create a tremendous anxiety in Lois.

A second sub-theme: Lois is not interested in generating or encountering problems that force her to rethink her ideas or develop new solutions. One aspect of this is that she simply does not want to put in the time and energy it would require. Lois is tired of being a teacher, she is boredwith being a teacher, she has no interest in putting any energy into her

work after 3PM. She thinks of trying new ideas in terms of how much time and energy they "cost her".

Another aspect is that she seems to be a practical person who does not enjoy problem solving or reflection. In a year of our talking together, she has rarely reflected on her stated position or referred to a previous talk to reconsider it in the light of some recent experience.

Perhaps because of this Lois tried to introduce writing tasks that will cause few problems and the writing problems students have she rarely deals with. She says, "For me writing was never too difficult like it is for some of these kids. I think my mind always worked logically even when I was a small child so I can't really deal with that problem with children."

Lois sees Lilia, a child who forgets to capitalize I's as either unteachable, or as having a weak self concept. Children who are not motivated to write in their journals pose an insoluble problem to Lois: "I don't know how to get kids who hate writing to like it."

Therefore, that writing can make visible children's confusion is not a benefit to Lois. In fact, I believe she is unaware that such a use of writing exists. Writing as drill and evaluation allows her to reduce children's problems to a manageable level: the children are right or wrong.

A third theme. Lois needs to be the ultimate authority in the classroom and to have the children a ready audience for her feelings. She says, "I share my feelings and thoughts with the kids. You can't check it all the time. How can the others do

it? You'd never be yourself. You'd have to control yourself all the time. I can't be like that." Being in Lois's classroom seems like it must be similar to being in her mind- a continual stream of thoughts, questions, comments.

This need to express her feelings relates to writing in opposing ways. On the one hand, Lois believes that people need to express their feelings. It is this belief that led her three years ago to try her friend's suggestion that she use journals. "A journal," she says, "is a way to encourage writing as enjoyable, not marked, not judged. "It's valuable to express thoughts and ideas instead of talking all the time. Maybe it's the first time its dawning on a kid that writing is something I can do without the teacher, for myself." Creative writing, too, falls under this rubric. She says that creative writing makes children want to write on their own as a result of the greater amount of freedom they have.

On the other hand, her desire to be the ultimate authority and to have the children a ready audience works contrary to her desire for the children's freedom and free expression.

In a lesson on letter writing, for example, I noted that during the sixty minutes of the lesson there was little silence-- a silence of three minutes twice and twice a silence of thirty seconds. The rest of the time Lois was talking with either the class or with individuals. She brought up issues that had to do with the letters, and issues not at all related- a trip, an incident from a previous day.

As a result of this continual stream of consciousness, the

children are never alone. There is never a sense of privacy. How does this relate to writing in her classroom? Writing can provide time and space for a writer to make meaning of new ideas and experience. Here that time is non existent. It must be the tenacious child who can let go of Lois's voice and the inviting discussion, concentrate on the difficulties in writing, and become involved in that autonomy in which she or he might break free from Lois's construction of reality.

For this too seems inescapable. Lois's class is the embodiment of her beliefs. In all the time I have observed her classroom I have never heard a discussion of an issue, rather I have noticed sequences of story telling and series of convergent questions, often interpreted by Lois as a moral of how one should act. Early in the year Lois had the children report on their summer vacations. I quote from my fieldnotes:

Give Bruce your attention. Now Lois turns to Bruce and says "This summer" and Bruce repeats, "this summer." "I went" and again Bruce repeats, "I went," and goes on. He says he went on a plane and J interrupts to ask the class how many have been on a plane. She asks a series of questions: How many days was he gone, in July or August. She asks if anyone has questions. Vinny asks what kinds of fish were at Sea World. Bruce begins to answer and J takes over telling an anecdote about seeing the dolphins at Sea World and how the people who rushed and pushed to get seats in the front were drenched by the end of the show.. Now a kid calls out "Mrs. B--" and she replies,"You're talking to Bruce, not Mrs B. Bruce is in charge."

Why is this not conducive to the concept of writing that we are talking about? Writing can be an invitation to a student to claim authority, but here Lois is the sole authority and meaning maker. To use writing to help children establish their own authority is unlikely to appeal to Lois and so, again, writing retains its place as a method of drill and evaluation.

Having given a brief picture of one part of Lois's world view, and how it seems to permeate her use of writing, I ask--should we be totally discouraged about working with our colleagues and their reluctance, and with our own difficulties with teaching writing?

There is certainly good reason to be discouraged. Not only is Lois's world view intimately related to her use of writing, but the second teacher with whom I work, and the third teacher, each has a different world view, equally complex, equally affecting of how they use writing in their classroom. It seems that to change one's use of writing involves changing oneself, and that is no easy matter. For Lois, to change her use of writing she must care less about appearance, which now is vital to her, she must be willing to encounter problems which she now avoids, she must share some of her authority. Such a task has not traditionally been undertaken in the schools.

On the other hand, it hopefully is true that the more we understand, the more guidance we will have in how to conduct teacher education. So I opt for feeling encouraged and looking at implications of these preliminary findings of this study not only, as I have said, for elementary school teachers but for

teachers of all levels.

It seems to me that one clear message is that we are going to have to drop our notion of teaching teachers by transmission. Lois was part of a district writing program in which she was given a workshop process to use in her class. The fact is, she has not once tried any part of this process with her class. Often our message to teachers is that they should help students interpret new knowledge in the context of past experience and this will have to be our message to ourselves also.

Another implication is that providing one method of writing use is not enough. In fact, it may be that a large part of our job will be to help teachers see inconsistencies in their own work, find places where they are dissatisfied or where they are curious and then act as resources. We need to begin with where teachers want to be, not where we want them to be.

A third implication relates to the larger context of the school. Lois is not interested in giving energy to her job. Yet for a year, once a week on her lunch hour, she has talked with me about writing and teaching, despite her assertion that she doesn't like to because it makes her feel guilty. I believe that she agreed to participate in this project because she wanted to talk with another adult. Teachers are isolated; they have little time to talk with each other. There is often little in the school environment that encourages reflection, experimentation, commitment or collaboration. It may be that a large part of our job will be to help teachers support each other and to be partners with them rather than outsiders there to instruct.

There is another implication for this study and that is for us, teacher educators. This research study has been difficult, a study of myself as well as these teachers. I have been forced to acknowledge that I want teachers to see things my way, and that I am willing to be a college teacher and not an elementary school teacher. I have had to acknowledge the difficulties that these teachers face and I cannot simply say, well of course you can find time every day to do writing. I have looked at my own teaching of writing, where I shy away from activities because of my fear of them, where I grow impatient with teachers and students because of my convictions.

We too are just people and have been raised in a society where there are great pressures to compete, to be right, to be the authority. We too need to look at our own process, not only of composing, but of teaching, to become aware of the conflicting beliefs that probably underlie our work with students and colleagues. We have to abandon the elitist and alienating position that only the teachers we work with have problems. I believe that in this search we will come to see that we cannot be consultants but that we must be collaborators; ultimately we will come to see the incredible power of writing and of partnership, the power of each both to threaten and enable.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE